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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SAN SALVADOR 002679

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: THE DECLINING INFLUENCE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

REF: SAN SALVADOR 0750

¶1. SUMMARY: In the last 17 years, the Roman Catholic Church has lost 12 percent of its share of the nation's population, falling from 64 to 52 percent, and Catholicism seems to have declined in power since the end of the country's 1980-1992 civil war. The proportion of Salvadorans belonging to Protestant sects has almost doubled, from approximately 16 to 29 percent. However, the nation's most affluent families are still predominantly Catholic, and the most active Catholics join Protestants in supporting the ruling center-right Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). Non-practitioners and atheists tend to vote for the opposition leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). END SUMMARY.

A SWING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

¶2. Background: Salvadoran culture has been largely shaped by the influence of the Roman Catholic Church since the religion's introduction by Spanish conquerors in the early 1500s. In more recent years, that influence has fluctuated from a socially liberal to conservative orientation. In 1977, former Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero adopted an outspoken stance in favor of "liberation theology" that alienated many of the church's most influential members. Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas followed Romero's example during his 1983-1994 tenure. Much changed in the years following the 1992 Peace Accords, which ended repression and violence on the part of government forces and guerrillas. With the selection of Fernando Saenz Lacalle as Archbishop of San Salvador in 1995, the Catholic Church entered a new era during which it withdrew its support for "liberation theology"; Saenz-Lacalle has placed a renewed emphasis on individual salvation and morality. However, an underlying division still exists within the Salvadoran Catholic Church vis--vis such political issues.

¶3. According to Director Miguel Cruz of the University of Central America's Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), a silent struggle continues between the liberation-theology-oriented Jesuits and the conservative Catholic group Opus Dei, the latter of which counts Archbishop Saenz Lacalle as a member. Many Jesuits who cling to liberation theology believe that the church should place greater emphasis on responding to the human needs of socially-marginalized segments of society, while Opus Dei promotes spiritual growth among its adherents through their everyday activities.

PROTESTANT GROUPS HAVE ALMOST DOUBLED

¶4. While the Salvadoran Catholic Church has struggled with internal division, Protestant groups have grown rapidly. In an in-depth study published in April, leading daily "La Prensa Grafica" reported that since 1988, the Catholic Church has lost 12 percent of its share of El Salvador's population, while the proportion of the nation belonging to Protestant sects has almost doubled, from approximately 16 to 29 percent. Catholicism enjoys its greatest percentage of adherents (60.8 percent) among those above age 53, and its lowest share (50.1 percent) among those aged 18-26. Geographically, Catholicism reaches its highest percentage of the population (circa 67 percent) in the nation's central zone that includes the populous greater San Salvador metropolitan region, while in the country's westernmost provinces only 42 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic.

¶5. Although Protestantism has expanded rapidly in recent decades, Protestants' presence in El Salvador dates from the 1896 establishment of the Central American Mission (CAM) in El Salvador and Guatemala. Since then, Protestant missionaries have been active, particularly those representing American and Canadian evangelical denominations. Between 1930 and 1945, membership in Protestant sects grew 9 percent annually, dropping slightly to 7.6 percent annual growth from 1945 to 1960, followed by a dramatic resurgence in growth during the 1970s. Some observers attributed this growth to a rejection of politicized activism as embodied by liberation theology.

Others have interpreted the high rate of Protestant conversion as a spiritual reaction against the violence and social instability of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Some assert that the nation's predominantly Roman Catholic elite found an ideological ally in this brand of Protestantism, not only for its apolitical orientation, but also for its work-oriented values and its readiness not to blame the nation's social ills on the existing political and economic system.

CATHOLIC CHURCH REORIENTS ITSELF TOWARD ROME

¶16. The Salvadoran Catholic Church has in effect been "re-Romanized", and now centers its message on individual salvation and morality. In 1998, Saenz Lacalle succeeded in an effort to prohibit legally all types of abortion, by busing Catholic schoolchildren to the Legislative Assembly to stage anti-abortion demonstrations. In an effort to influence legislators, Opus Dei also solicited thousands of signatures for anti-abortion petitions from churchgoers after Mass; some political observers viewed this as an inappropriate intervention in national policy on the part of the Catholic Church. Archbishop Saenz Lacalle has also defended the family as society's core institution, and has been outspoken in his stand against homosexual marriage.

THE PERILS OF "BROTHER TOBY"

¶17. Perhaps nothing better illustrates Protestants' increasing clout (and a corresponding weakening in Catholics' lock on access to political power) than President Saca's decision to invite influential Protestant pastor Rev. Edgar Lopez Bertrand, better known as "Brother Toby" to deliver the invocation at his June 2004 inauguration. This gesture on Saca's part, which marked the first appearance ever of a Protestant minister at a Salvadoran presidential inauguration, was a clear indication of Protestants' growing numbers and influence.

¶18. Less than a year later on May 16, 2005, Bertrand was arrested by U.S. immigration authorities on his arrival in Houston, and charged with falsifying a birth certificate in order to obtain a U.S. passport for an 11-year old minor who he claimed was his daughter. Lopez, who heads the nation's largest evangelical congregation, received numerous high-level Salvadoran visitors during his incarceration, including several Legislative Assembly deputies. He pleaded guilty to the charges, and was released from custody August 24 with sentence of time served (101 days) plus legal costs.

SOCIAL CLASSES AND RELIGION IN EL SALVADOR

¶19. Notwithstanding their increasing influence at all levels of Salvadoran society, a "prosperity gap" still exists between the traditionally-Catholic elite families and Protestants. A May IUDOP poll showed that Catholic families are still disproportionately represented at higher-income levels in comparison with Protestants and others. Some 11.7 percent of Catholic families have incomes above \$576/month (with 3.7 percent above \$1,143/month), compared with 5.5 percent of Protestant families (only 1.0 percent of which enjoy incomes above \$1,143). A slight majority (51.5 percent) of those who practice no religion fell into the lowest income bracket (\$0-144/month).

CATHOLICS, PROTESTANTS, AND ELECTIONS

¶10. Religious groups of all kinds were politically active in the March 2004 presidential election. Lutheran, Episcopal, and "mainstream" Baptist church bodies endorsed the FMLN candidate, while most charismatic Protestant groups such as Assembly of God and Friends of Israel (the local charismatic Baptist sect headed by "Brother Toby") actively supported ARENA.

¶11. A May IUDOP poll revealed that 30.8 percent of Catholics were inclined to vote for ARENA in municipal elections next March, versus 17 percent who supported the FMLN. Among Protestants, 35.8 percent planned to support ARENA mayoral candidates, with only 11.1 percent for the FMLN. In looking ahead to Legislative Assembly elections, 45.4 percent of Catholics favored ARENA, versus 15.6 percent support for the FMLN. While 48.2 percent of Protestants expressed support for ARENA Assembly candidates, 12.7 percent indicated an intention to vote for the FMLN. IUDOP Director Miguel Cruz underscored these poll results, opining that most Protestants and active Catholics will likely vote ARENA in March 2006 municipal and Legislative Assembly elections, while those not active in religion will favor the

FMLN.

A MORE DIVERSE RELIGIOUS FUTURE?

¶12. COMMENT: President Saca's tapping a Protestant minister to preside at his inauguration was clearly an acknowledgement of their increasing importance in Salvadoran politics. If current trends continue, in less than a decade, Roman Catholics will no longer be the nation's majority religion. Although Saca's cabinet is wholly Catholic, and a bare majority of Salvadorans continue to identify themselves as Catholics, a more diverse religious landscape, and the political ramifications that entails, would appear to be an indisputable reality for the nation's foreseeable future.